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South Caucasus: The Main Issues of Regional Insecurity and Instability

by

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and gaining their independence, the three states of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have shared almost the same security problems and challenges. Scarcity of democratic institutions, lack of economic sovereignty, and high levels of corruption were, and still are, the key internal threats for all of them. While the situation concerning the states' internal security problems have mostly intrinsic causes, the main issues of the regional security and stability are dependent on a more collaborative approach among the states. The key driving factors of regional instability and insecurity remain the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. Another major problem is growing tensions in Russian–Georgian relations. Historically established negative Armenian–Turkish relations are also cause for concern. The Iranian nuclear program has an impact on the region as well and makes the situation more complex. This SRP describes the region's current issues and argues that the South Caucasus will remain unstable as long as these issues remain unsolved. The paper will further discuss the current initiatives and possible solutions.

South Caucasus: The Main Issues of Regional Insecurity and Instability

Introduction

The South Caucasus is a sensitive region, as it was during the time of the Soviet Union, in terms of loyalty and respect towards each other, and especially treatment of national minorities. There are several reasons for this, such as religious diversity, ethnic enclaves, and the status of the national minorities in all three republics. That is why at the sunset of the Soviet regime the region became more vulnerable. Some analysts even assume that waves of ethno-political conflicts in the late 1980s initiated the breakdown of the Soviet Union.¹ Thus, these problems helped lay the foundation for future insecurity and instability in the South Caucasus.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the three states of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have shared very similar security problems and challenges. Scarcity of democratic institutions, lack of economic sovereignty, and high levels of corruption were, and still are, the key internal threats for all of them. Nevertheless, it seems that predominantly Georgia among these three states succeeded in taking steps to fight corruption, establish democratic institutions, and transform its economy to a more liberal environment. In the mean time, corruption in Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly in the lower levels of government, is still cherished as the Soviet Union's cultural heritage, and democracy and economy are far from Western standards.

While the situation concerning the states' internal security problems have mostly intrinsic causes, the main issues of regional insecurity and instability are dependent on a more collaborative approach among the states.² The key driving factors of regional instability and insecurity remain the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazian and

South Ossetian conflicts. Another major problem is growing tensions in Russian–Georgian relations. Historically established negative Armenian–Turkish relations are also cause for concern. The Iranian nuclear program has an impact on the region as well and makes the situation more complex. This paper will examine these issues and will propose solutions that will enhance regional security and stability.

Unresolved Conflicts

To be sure, any conflict has far reaching consequences and the worst case scenario is one where conflict is considered to be as unresolved or frozen and hostile parties remain in a situation of neither peace nor war. The unresolved Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts are undoubtedly the main pressing problems in the South Caucasus and keys to regional security and stability.³ One may struggle to explain why people, who have lived next to each other for many years and shared the same culture and traditions, suddenly displayed hostility towards each other. Meanwhile detection of the real roots and causes can often be difficult because of hidden problems and their depth.

The South Caucasian conflicts have a few aspects that make them more difficult in terms of approaches that have to be taken into account while resolving them. First of all, it is often argued as to what kind of conflicts they are: territorial, ethno–political, or the combination of both.⁴ Second, the problems go even deeper when it comes to the question on which principle of international law the solution of conflicts will be based: on the basis of territorial integrity or the people’s right to self–determination.⁵ Third, in the Nagorno Karabakh case the position of the latter in the negotiating process is represented by the Armenian government. Azerbaijan does not want to see Nagorno Karabakh around the negotiating table as a negotiating party. However, any time before

and after each negotiation round takes place, Armenian officials have consultations with the Nagorno Karabakh government by informing the latter about ongoing negotiation processes.⁶ Even though Azerbaijan does not accept Nagorno Karabakh's presence in the negotiating process, in 1994, a ceasefire agreement was signed by three respective representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and unrecognized the Nagorno Karabakh Republic.⁷ Thus, after many years of negotiations these fundamental questions relating to the approaches of conflicts' resolution are not agreed by all parties involved in conflicts.

Nagorno Karabakh Conflict

The roots of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict go back to the early period of the establishment of the Soviet regime in South Caucasus and formation of three Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Even at that time, Soviet Russia recognized Nagorno Karabakh as disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan. From 1921 to 1923 different Soviet Committees changed the status of Nagorno Karabakh several times. Thus, the National Council of Azerbaijan SSR in the Declaration of June 12, 1921 proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh as an integral part of the Armenian SSR based on agreement between governments of Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, Stalin's interference and personal decision forced a review of this decision. As a result, another decision incorporated Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan with the promise of formation on its territory an autonomous oblast. Only two years later on July 7, 1923, the Central Executive Revolutionary Committee of Azerbaijan SSR forced by the Soviet Central government formed Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), within Azerbaijan SSR. Thus, the issue of Nagorno Karabakh was temporarily frozen.⁸

Nevertheless, throughout the entire existence of Soviet Union this problem was constantly raised to the Soviet Central authorities. However, initiators were always severely punished and peoples' voices were ignored. During the Soviet period NKAO became one of the backward parts of the Soviet Union and poverty, and lack of basic needs became a norm. Consequently, looking for better life conditions, the Armenian population gradually abandoned their homes and fled to other parts of the Soviet Union. Thus, according to late 80s Soviets' statistics, the demographic situation in the region has undergone visible changes and the percentage of Azeri population has significantly increased while the Armenian has decreased.⁹

Discriminations of the Armenian population throughout the entire Soviet period led to the explosion of the situation in February 1988. Large scale protests took place all over Nagorno Karabakh. In response, Soviet Central government declared in Nagorno Karabakh, some parts of Armenia, and Azerbaijan a "state of emergency" and Soviet troops with a special representative from Moscow took control over the Oblast. With the breakdown of the Soviet regime, Azerbaijan launched offensive operations in order to get Nagorno Karabakh back under its control. Thus, began the active phase of the war, which continued until 1994. Tens of thousands of refugees, deaths, and material damage were devastating consequences of the war for both sides. In May 1994 in Bishkek with Russian mediation, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and an unrecognized Nagorno Karabakh Republic signed a ceasefire.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Azerbaijani authorities do not consider the signed document as an official peace agreement and the situation has become more fragile and the menace of war increases daily.

After signing the ceasefire in 1994 the OSCE Minsk Group (co-chairs Russia, USA, and France) took responsibility in terms of settling the conflict and negotiations are held in this framework since that date.¹¹ For the whole period of the negotiating process several options were proposed by the co-chairs. None of the proposed options were satisfying for either side and there is not one on which both sides totally agree. Currently, negotiations are held on the “Madrid Proposals”. Co-chairs presented this document in November, 2007.¹² Even though the above mentioned document is a basis for negotiations there are still many questions and points that parties must come to agreement on. The OSCE Minsk Group is the only internationally mandated body within the framework of which negotiations are held. The Minsk group has the means to get this issue solved and it uses all available assets to achieve progress in the negotiation process. The only problem which is also often mentioned by the co-chairs is that parties do not show enough willingness to achieve progress in the negotiation process.

Despite the ongoing negotiations, the current situation on the whole border perimeter between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno Karabakh is very unstable and strained to the possible limits. The border line especially between Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh is under constant fire from all types of small arms, as well as heavy caliber weapons. There is no single day or even hour when shooting does not take place. For instance, while Armenia insists on pulling out snipers from the border and refusing to employ special troops for subversive activities, Azerbaijan violently uses them.¹³ As a result, losses from both sides bring difficulties in the negotiating process and mediators often, instead of concentrating on the resolution of the conflict, are involved in the investigation processes. According to the Ministry of Defense of

Armenia, for the last year Azerbaijan broke ceasefire more than 16300 times.¹⁴

Consequently, in some places, civilian population became a target as well and losses among them were unavoidable.

The situation is aggravated any time a meeting of presidents takes place. Simple analysis shows that for the last two years it became a norm to anticipate Azerbaijani Special Forces actions right after the next negotiation round is done. Tactical actions on the ground are strongly supported by the top Azerbaijani authorities and official announcements such as “war is unavoidable and this is the only way to get Karabakh back” are an inseparable part of Azerbaijani propaganda.¹⁵ In the light of these developments, it is difficult to imagine that a negotiation process can assure enough guarantees and this extremely fragile peace could be maintained until final resolution of the conflict.

South Ossetian and Abkhazian Conflicts

South Ossetia

The issue of separating from Soviet Georgia and unifying with North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation, was cultivated in South Ossetians' hearts and minds for a long period of time. However, it became more public and openly demanded in 1990. These demands took place almost at the same time as the Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia abolished the South Ossetian autonomy status.¹⁶ In response to the decision of Georgian authorities, the South Ossetians began to initiate steps to unite with North Ossetia. This was followed by an invasion of Georgian troops in South Ossetia and brutal conflict with the use of force and cruel fighting in Georgia took place. According to different statistics, more than 2,000 people were killed and thousands were

injured as well as the predominant part of infrastructure was damaged or completely destroyed.

The active phase of war was stopped as the Russian President Boris Yeltsin initiated a ceasefire process in 1992. As a result, a mixed peacekeeping force component (MPF) from Russia, Georgia, and South Ossetia was established to monitor and observe the ceasefire agreement.¹⁷ Despite the end of brutal fighting, killings of civilians on both sides, and destruction of the region occurred; a long-term solution for this conflict was not found. Like the other two conflicts in the South Caucasus this one was temporally frozen and became a long-term problem.

Any conflict can remain frozen as long as either side involved in the dispute does not feel strong enough to break the existing status quo or have a particular interest in doing so. In South Ossetian conflict this issue is twofold. First, it was preceded by a long period of skirmishes between Russian and Georgian troops stationed on the border. According to some independent studies regular provocations conducted by the Russian military prior to the start of the Georgian military operation, gave Russians an advantage in advancing elements of Russian MRRs into South Ossetia.¹⁸ Second, it seems that the Georgian government on the other side, with Mr. Mikhail Saakashvili, as commander in chief, felt confident enough to break the status quo concerning South Ossetia. Hence, in August 2008, the Georgian government probably came to the decision that diplomacy was not working anymore and war was their last resort. Thus, after launching an offensive in August 2008, Georgian troops achieved one of their objectives, namely taking control over the capital of the then unrecognized republic of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali. Nevertheless, neither Georgians nor Ossetians

acknowledged responsibility for starting the war. There are many proposals as well as official and private reports that blame and try to find one of the sides guilty. For example in his article in “The Washington Post” the first and last president of the USSR, Mr. Gorbachev, wrote:

The roots of this tragedy lie in the decision of Georgia’s separatist leaders in 1991 to abolish South Ossetian autonomy. Thus, it turned out to be a time bomb for Georgia’s territorial integrity. Each time successive Georgian leaders tried to impose their will by force – both in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia, where the issues of autonomy are similar – it made the situation worse. New wounds aggravated old injuries.¹⁹

Apparently Mr. Gorbachev did some good while being the president of the USSR. He initiated the process which brought independence to all former Soviet Republics. On the other hand, it was his responsibility to assure a peaceful initiation, and most importantly, a peaceful accomplishment of this process. There is no doubt that he and his companions failed to achieve this goal. And now instead of blaming someone and looking for a scapegoat, it is better to ask oneself why the foundations of the new states on the Soviet territory were done in a bloody way. The strategy of blaming the opposite side was taken by the Georgians as well. According to a Georgian MOD official, the South Ossetians previously rejected Tbilisi’s decision to unilaterally resume a ceasefire. Therefore, “the Georgian side has decided to restore constitutional order in the entire region”, said Mamuka Kurashvili on August 8th.²⁰ Even though this statement comes from the Georgian high level military authority, it is not clear enough to understand how one side can reject a proposal of stopping fire if another side is “restoring constitutional order.” To be clearer, by “restoring constitutional order”, Mr. Saakashvili meant use of military power and taking South Ossetia back under his control. The main issue here must not be who did what and when, but why it happened again. Another crucial fact

that can certainly help to envisage the end state of any use of military means is history. It is not difficult to figure out that there are not many examples when military victory could assure achievement of the political endstate of conflict as well.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia shares almost the same destiny with Nagorno Karabakh in terms of the approach that was taken to tie it up with Soviet Georgia. At the beginning of the establishment of the Soviet regime in the Caucasus, Abkhazia was a separate Soviet Republic with the special status of Union Republic associated with the Georgian SSR.²¹ In 1931, Stalin finally made Abkhazia an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR and it remained so one until the Soviet Union broke down.²² The main argument in making it part of Georgia was that Abkhazians and Georgians, and other national minorities living in that region, were very close to each other from cultural, economic, and geographical standpoints.

After gaining its independence, a radical nationalistic regime of Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power in Georgia and restored the constitution from 1921. According to this constitution Abkhazia was still granted autonomy. Nevertheless, the newly established regime did not specify the legal status of Abkhazia. Even though Gamsakhurdia was very careful not to threaten Abkhazia's autonomous status, his rhetoric toward the Abkhaz, as well as Ossetes, Armenians and Azeris living in Georgia, was very inflammatory, calling them "guests" and implying that their citizenship might be restricted or revoked. At some point Gamsakhurdia's government had actually reached a deal on ethnic representation in the Abkhaz parliament with the Abkhaz authorities in summer 1991, but as he was deposed in December 1991 the Abkhaz ignored the deal and the Georgian deputies to the Abkhaz parliament walked out in protest.

However, the main complaint of the Abkhazians in this confrontation was that Tbilisi was encroaching on its autonomous status which in turn became the primary cause of conflict. One of the Abkhazian demands to the Georgian government was restoration of the Constitution from 1925, which, according to their interpretation, gave them equal rights with Georgia.²³ Thus, relying on the above mentioned Constitution, Abkhazia demanded equal status with Georgia and coexistence in free confederation. The Georgian side rejected these demands and in August 1992 Shevardnadze sent Georgian troops into Abkhazia. Thus began the “hot phase” of the conflict. Abkhazia, in a very short time, formed a large number of paramilitary units and with the help of different nationalistic movements from North Caucasus and with Russian support expressed fierce resistance.

By the end of 1994, the Russian military, under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), took control over the region with the task to maintain a ceasefire regime.²⁴ In addition, on the border between Georgia and Abkhazia in August 1993 the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was established. The main task of this mission was to observe the ceasefire agreement between the Georgian government and Abkhaz authorities. However, UNOMIG’s mandate expired in June 2009 and it came to an end because of not meeting a consensus among the UN Security Council members. Russia in particular did not agree to the extension of this mandate, and voted for a “technical roll-over of a mission.”²⁵ There are many other international organizations involved in economic development,

security and stability building processes. However, those organizations do not have the same mandate as had UNOMIG.

Although all above mentioned organizations have been involved in a process of peaceful settlement and resolution of the conflict for so many years, agreements on key issues are not achieved and there are no conditions for progress in the visible future. In particular, there are two main issues: first, regarding returning Georgian refugees in Abkhazia and second, the final status of Abkhazia remains very controversial. However, the second issue is more complicated since Abkhazia is insisting on complete independence from Georgia. Positions and confidence of Abkhaz authorities became even stronger as the Russian Federation, in August 2008, officially recognized Abkhazia as a sovereign country. This political act from Russia, while it corresponded to the existing status quo, certainly put the conflict resolution process on a back burner for an unpredictable period of time. On the other hand, Russia confirmed one more time that there will be no positive solution for Georgia found, until it is treated by the Georgian government in the way it wants to be treated.

What Makes Conflicts in the South Caucasus the Same but Different?

It is clear that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is the most complicated one among all three conflicts. There are a few reasons for that. First, two out of three regional countries are involved in this conflict. Due to the geographical location of the countries, the conflict obstructs regional projects, such as the energy and communication projects. Second, unlike Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, where Russia is the major player, in the Nagorno Karabakh issue, Turkey and Iran are also involved. Third and as previously mentioned, in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Russia, the United States, and France are mediators in the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation

in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group.²⁶ In addition to the above mentioned differences, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts transformed after the August war in 2008. Russia's 2008 military victory and the subsequent military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia made "unfreezing" of these conflicts less likely in the nearest future.

Another difference is ethnicity of the conflicting parties. Abkhazians and Ossetians have cultural, ethnical and some other similarities with Georgians; Armenians and Azerbaijanians have very little in common in their cultures. Thus, the hostility level between Armenians and Azerbaijanians is so high that it is impossible to imagine that these two nations can coexist together again. The especially cynical Azerbaijani propaganda, obviously financed and supported at the national level, gets sometime to the level which cannot be acceptable by the normal human brain. Numerous examples show how the Azerbaijani authorities with the media support inflame in its population hatred regarding the Armenian nation and everything associated with Armenia.²⁷

It is essential to mention that the concern of final status remains open for all of the conflicts. This issue became a stumbling block in all three conflicts. As the negotiations go on, it becomes more obvious that consensus on all secondary issues could be easily found once the decision on final statuses is made. According to Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities, they are ready to offer a wide autonomy status to their respective parties. However, in all three cases the opposite sides only agree on recognition of their de-facto independence. Decisions with respect to some contested territories and return of refugees will be discussed after the most important question is solved and international guaranties are given.

Russian–Georgian Relations

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia, like other regional countries, started a process of creating an independent statehood. Georgia's foreign policy was mainly oriented towards the West and the main efforts were focused on rapid integration into the EU and NATO. On the other hand, another major goal was to overthrow the Russian political influence within Georgia. Along with these processes, the Georgian government was constantly blaming Russia concerning its involvement and position in Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. The official position of the Georgian government with respect to Russia was to show on different international stages that it is only Russia who is against Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, it seems that Georgian authorities did not seriously take into account the Russian factor and thought that it would be possible to solve problems concerning its territorial integrity without Russia. Another reason is that Georgians concluded that Russia had become a party to the conflict and therefore should not be playing the role of mediator.

In this confrontation process with Russia, Georgia's main leverage on it was Mr. Saakashvili's demand that Russia withdraw all its troops stationed in Georgia, even though some of the earlier signed agreements with the preceding Georgian government were still in force.²⁸ Hence, notwithstanding the traditionally good bonds between Russian and Georgian nationalities, their relations went into deep crisis. As expected, Russia without any hesitation, used different assets of its national power and first closed the border with Georgia, placed a visa regime for Georgian citizens, and imposed an embargo against Georgian products. Diplomatic relations were downsized to a minimum. In the beginning of summer 2008 the situation escalated to the possible maximum. Daily skirmishes and small border incidents between Georgian and South

Ossetian forces were pointing out that potential for the conflict revival was very high. The situation finally collapsed as Georgia on August 8, 2008, launched an offensive against South Ossetia and tried to “restore constitutional order on its territory.”²⁹

Russia’s answer to Georgia was prompt. Within a couple of days the Russian 58th Army and many other military units were sent to the region. After a few days the Georgian military was pushed back and had to retreat with large losses in manpower and equipment.³⁰ Thus, Russia entered into the war with Georgia and destroyed Saakashvili’s plans to get back under its control South Ossetia by military means. Russia’s explanation in sending troops to South Ossetia was protection of its peacekeepers and citizens of Russia residing in South Ossetia.

The five-day war between Russia and Georgia changed a lot in the South Caucasus region. One of Russia’s biggest achievements after the war was the deployment of a large scale military contingent in South Ossetia and a reinforcement of troops stationed in Abkhazia. However, the main event occurred on 26 August 2008. Russia recognized two conflicting parties, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as sovereign countries. Even though none of the world’s progressive democracies has followed Russia’s example, it was a challenging message to all of them. In his speech dedicated to recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, then President of Russia, D. Medvedev, said,

A decision needs to be taken based on the situation on the ground. Considering the freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples and being guided by the provisions of the UN Charter, the 1970 Declaration on the Principles of International Law Governing Friendly Relations Between States, the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and other fundamental international instruments, I signed Decrees on the recognition by the Russian Federation of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence. ... Russia calls on other states to follow its example. This

is not an easy choice to make, but it represents the only possibility to save human lives.³¹

With the recognition of the mentioned territories, Russia achieved two main goals. It reassured its strategic interests in the region and embarrassed Saakashvili and his team. The Russian after-crisis information campaign was directed towards Saakashvili with the main objective to discredit him in front of his nation and in the eyes of the West and convince the West that Georgia was not worth admitting to NATO and other European structures. Russians wanted to put all blame for an unsuccessful military campaign and failure of Georgian foreign policy exclusively on Saakashvili and his government. It seems that they achieved this goal since Saakashvili's party lost the majority of the vote in a recent parliamentary election. However, there are a few other reasons that many political analysts point out. First, despite large economic reforms, Saakashvili failed to bring the country's economy to the promised level. Second, the Georgians got tired of Saakashvili and his attempt to remain in power by changing the strong presidential system to a parliamentarian. Third, Saakashvili lost the monopoly on patriotism.³²

The new Georgian government, with Prime Minister Mr. Ivanishvili, announced that they would initiate a negotiation process with Russia. On November 1, 2012 Ivanishvili appointed a Special Representative for relations with Russia, although there are still no formal diplomatic relations established with latter. While introducing this post Ivanishvili told journalists, "introduction of this post did not mean the shift in Georgia's foreign policy priorities and either the change in Tbilisi's stance over formal diplomatic relations with Russia."³³ Probably Ivanishvili's goal was first to reestablish Russian-Georgian economic cooperation and open borders for free trade. However, it seems

that there is not much enthusiasm on the Russian side since the President of Russia, Mr. Putin, said in turn that he personally does not believe that the appointment of the Special Representative will change a lot.³⁴

Certainly, in case this process succeeds, it will be very useful for Armenia as well, since Armenia is heavily dependent on Russian imports. Good news for Armenians could be the reopening of the rail road communication with Russia through Abkhazia. However, Azerbaijan and Turkey will surely express their negative position in regard to this option because it will help to terminate Armenia's long term blockade.³⁵ However, these are just talks and in spite of the fact that the new Georgian authorities have recognized the role of Russia in the South Caucasus and proposed to start a negotiation process with Russia, Moscow is still very suspicious about beginning any talks yet. At least the former Russian President, Medvedev, has many times stressed that as long as Saakashvili is in office, no negotiations or any type of contacts will be initiated.³⁶

The citizens in both countries in turn are generally very negative concerning deterioration in Russian-Georgian relations. It is not only war that worsened Russian-Georgian relations. It was preceded with deportation of Georgians from Russia based on their ethnicity. In some other cases, in both countries, many innocent people were arrested and declared persona non grata because of being accused in espionage. Unfortunately, the war became the biggest confrontation scene between the two countries.³⁷ Both countries will need to put in much effort in order to restore their relations. Russia must become a country that will take the first step towards establishment of the diplomatic relations and reduction of tensions between the two

countries. Georgia has already done a lot in this direction; such as their promise that the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will not be solved by military means. Moreover, statements about readiness for dialogue with Russia came from President Saakashvili's administration as well.³⁸

Armenian–Turkish Relations

Another root problem for security and a key to regional stability is relations between Armenia and Turkey, more precisely the absence of any kind of relations. Two main factors that stir up a dispute between the countries are: historically strained relations with Turkey due to an official denial of the recognition of the genocide of Armenians during the Ottoman Empire and the Nagorno Karabakh issue. Hence, Armenia has neither political nor economic ties with Turkey and the border between the two countries was closed on a unilateral basis as an act of solidarity with Azerbaijan in 1993.³⁹ It is interesting to point out that the border was closed in 1993 whereas war between Armenia and Azerbaijan had been going for two years. The explanation for that is that by the end of 1993, Azerbaijan had lost its positions on the whole border perimeter and the Nagorno Karabakh blockade was finally ceased.

Armenia has always offered to establish political and economic relations with Turkey without any preconditions. Turkey in turn continuously insisted that Armenia must give up its efforts concerning international recognition of the genocide and involvement in settling the Karabakh conflict.⁴⁰ With respect to the genocide issue, Turkey refuses to use the word “genocide” or to explain the deaths of over a million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923. According to Turkey's official position, the cause for all those deaths was the First World War, and the issue should be left to historians. Concerning Armenia's involvement in the Nagorno Karabakh

conflict, Turkey accuses Armenia of invading Azerbaijani territories. Turkey insists that Armenia must sacrifice all its efforts with respect to Nagorno Karabakh. Thus, Turkey ties these two issues together and scrutinizes them as one. Turkey says that these two issues are tied together and looking for a solution for one without the other is impossible. However, in blaming Armenia, Turkey must not forget its own history. More than forty years ago Turkey illegally occupied northern Cyprus and its troops have been stationed there since. It is at least immoral for Turkey to make demands on Armenia and have this type of foreign policy regarding Armenia, but saying nothing for justifying its own delinquencies.⁴¹

The efforts of the current Armenian government, as well as those of its predecessors, with the support of various international institutions to break this impasse have been fruitless. Consistently, Turkey has walked away from the negotiating table whenever a solution seemed within reach. In 2009 in Zurich, with mediation by the United States and Switzerland, two protocols were signed and put forward for discussion and further ratification in Armenia's and Turkey's parliaments respectfully.⁴² As expected, Turkey again raised a precondition and tied further progress in Armenian-Turkish relations to the Nagorno Karabakh issue. From the Armenian perspective, the complexity of Armenian-Turkey relations is fabricated in Istanbul rather than in Yerevan. During her last visit to the region, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once again stressed that there is no connection between normalization of the Armenian-Turkey relations and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Once again she exhorted Turkey's authorities to restore dialog with Armenia.⁴³

Eventually, opening the border and establishing economic relations can at least be the first stage and a basis for the further development of political relations. Even if it does not come to close cooperation in the future, trade between the countries will be equally beneficial. Both countries should take into account that while building their future it is necessary to forgive each other some grievances and make compromises. Finally, establishing and developing Armenian-Turkey relations can make the situation in the region more stable and turn Armenia's economy more towards Turkey rather than Iran.

Iranian Nuclear Program

Iran has been developing its own nuclear program for many decades. It was initiated in the 1950s with the help of the United States and Western European governments and continued until the Shah of Iran was overthrown in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁴⁴ In fact the Iranian nuclear program and western help considered use of enriched uranium only for peaceful purposes. Besides, Iran has signed and ratified different treaties abdicating the possession of weapons of mass destruction including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, different problems have been an inseparable part of Iran's nuclear program. Two main issues that make international organizations and democratic countries extremely concerned about this nuclear program are: 1) not enough guarantees are given to the international community even though Iranian officials always stressed that enrichment of uranium will be used only for peaceful purposes and not to produce a nuclear weapon. 2) Iran's constant announcements that it will strike Israel and erase it from the earth.

As Iran closed all doors in front of the International Atomic Energy Agency, especially for the last decade, the development of its nuclear program became more suspicious. Currently, talks in many formats are going on but it seems that Iran is not

ready to open its nuclear facilities for unbiased inspection. As a consequence, different international institutions have placed sanctions on Iran in order to isolate it from the progressive world.⁴⁶ The United States assumed the leading role in isolating Iran from the rest of the world. The government of the United States succeeded in convincing its allies and partners to follow its example and as expected the economic situation in Iran is worsening daily. It became much worse as the European Union imposed its own sanctions.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, according to some Iranian officials sanctions imposed on Iran were and are first, against European companies because these companies will have to leave their business. Thus, the sanctions will affect the Europeans before they reach Iran.⁴⁸ Hence, the issue of effectiveness becomes essential and creates another choice, to be exact the use of military power, as a last resort.

Economic sanctions against Iran make problems not only for Iran but for other countries in the South Caucasus region as well. Since Azerbaijan and Turkey put an economic blockade on Armenia and Georgia does not maintain good relations with Russia, the main way for Armenia, in terms of economic trade and connection with the outer world, remains Iran. Armenia and Iran maintain several energy projects. Iranian natural gas supplies Armenia and during the last decade two major pipelines were constructed. The biggest portion of the imported diesel and petroleum in Armenia comes from Iran. Additionally, goods shipped to Armenia from the Middle East and Arab countries come through Iranian seaports. Even though there is no strong pressure from the international community on Armenia, because of its relations with Iran, economic cooperation with Iran in some circumstances is seen as a disruption of sanctions.

However, it is not affecting only Armenia but Azerbaijan and Georgia as well. Georgia particularly, was benefiting from Iranian goods transfers through its territory and was also trading with Iran. It can benefit from Iranian oil and gas as well and have an alternative, as a result be not completely dependent on Azerbaijani energy projects. With respect to Azerbaijan, it is necessary to mention that Azeri and Iranian ties are much tighter. First, there is an Azeri minority living on the border between Azerbaijan and Iran. Second, Azerbaijan is able to sustain its enclave Nachichevan only because of a single road that was built through Iran in order to connect Azerbaijan and its enclave. Third, some energy projects were jointly invested by Azerbaijani and Iranian companies. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan and Georgia have other alternatives, and thus are not concerned about further resolution of this problem as much as Armenia. Moreover, growing military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel allows many analysts to speculate with respect to the Azerbaijani position in case the military solution of the problem remains the last choice. According to Michael Moran, Iran's security services have concluded that "Azerbaijan has been enlisted by Israel in a campaign of cyber attacks, assassinations and detailed military planning aimed at destabilizing and ultimately destroying Tehran's nuclear research program."⁴⁹

In light of these developments and use of force against Iran, Azerbaijani authorities can take advantage of this situation and try to solve several issues at once. First, war against Iran will be an excellent cover for Azerbaijan to break the existing status quo with respect to the Nagorno Karabakh issue. If Azerbaijan agrees to provide its territory and military infrastructure for launching an offensive against Iran, it will certainly ask for some benefits for itself. The main advantage that Azerbaijan can get

will be a western promise not to get involved in a new conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁵⁰ The second advantage that Azerbaijan can look for is its long disputed status of Azerbaijani minority in the north of Iran. Even though this issue was never raised officially by Baku, different nationalistic movements, obviously with government support, keep it constantly blistering. In the case of Iran's defeat, Azerbaijan can easily claim these territories and try to break them off.

There are no doubts within the international community that the Iranian nuclear program became a world problem and that global politics are concerned. It is time to solve this issue once and forever. Further delay of it can be more problematic and difficult. For sure prevention of Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities is the best option for everyone. However, the main question, what it means and how it will take place, remains unclear and there is no united approach among the key players. Any decision taken with respect to the Iranian problem must first of all take into account the existing situation in the region and not provoke new destabilization.

Recommendations and Conclusion

All the above described processes are just main links in a long chain of problems. At least for the next few decades the South Caucasus will remain unstable and another few decades will be necessary to change the people's minds, build the necessary confidence and trust among the nations. Nevertheless, the countries themselves can play a significant role in terms of improving the situation and making the region more secure, stable and attractive for foreign investments. All parties must understand that a solution of any problem is in their best interests and will. The nations of the South Caucasus have to recognize that any involvement from the international community is just help to mitigate current security threats and disputes among them. The final solution

of any problem can be only found if countries demonstrate enough political will and address current issues by sacrificing some of their own interests. The key to one problem can become an imperative for another. However, it does not mean that all the processes must be tied up together and failure in one process can freeze another.

For example, Armenia can use the advantage of its good relations and strategic partnership with Russia and mediate a dialog between Russia and Georgia. It is in Armenia's best interests to have a stable and secure Georgia. Therefore, Armenia must get actively involved in settling problems between Russia and Georgia. Armenia's foreign policy must address existing issues between Russia and Georgia as one of the keys to its national security and stability, and convince Russia that peace and prosperity in Georgia are essential for future cooperation between Russia and Armenia. It will be also in Armenia's national interests to have one more door opened and break up a long lasting economic blockade. Reopening of the rail road connection with Russia through Abkhazia will foster economies of both countries and open new markets and opportunities for Armenia and Georgia. During an official and recent visit to Armenia, Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili assured that his government will do its best to make Armenian-Georgian ties the best ever in history. In his press conference in Yerevan he stressed that the Georgian side has repeatedly stated its readiness to operate the railway and the possibility of operating it is to a great extent linked to Russia's position. This message verifies one more time that Tbilisi can accept any effort that official Yerevan can put towards stabilizing relations between Russia and Georgia.⁵¹ To be clearer it seems that Georgia let Armenia know that it is more in Armenia's rather than Georgia's interests to have this issue solved. Besides, it seems

that the new Georgian government recognized that any further confrontation with Russia is just waste of time and hindrance for resolution of South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts. Therefore, Yerevan's active engagement in the reestablishment of political and economic relations between Russia and Georgia can be viewed as one of the pressing issues for Armenian foreign policy.

Another role for Armenia's foreign policy can be active participation in solving the situation relating to the Iranian nuclear program. Of course it will be very difficult for small country like Armenia, with its own problems on hand, to become a locomotive and be heavily involved in this issue. However, any involvement in this issue can only be beneficial for Armenia. One of the proposals from Armenia can be supplying Iran with energy from its nuclear plant even if the international community does not agree on Iran's peaceful enrichment of uranium. As a trade-off Armenia can increase import of Iranian natural gas and oil, thus become less dependent on Russian oil products. Once the Iranian nuclear issue is settled Armenia can become a transit country for Iran and offer the usage of its communication infrastructure in full range. The biggest benefit for Iran will be free and secure access to Georgian, Russian and European markets.

Georgia in turn can be a negotiator between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. For some reasons the previous Georgian government was supporting the isolation process of Armenia conducted by Azerbaijan and Turkey. It may seem that once the border between Armenia and Turkey is opened, Georgia's role may decrease. But the real benefit for Georgia and its citizens will be the usage of the railroad and other communication infrastructure which will connect the western regions of Georgia with Turkey in terms of being the shortest and cheapest route. At least with the reopening of

the border between Armenia and Turkey, Georgia can acquire one more access point to the outside world through Armenia. Therefore, even if it does not come to a final solution of problems with Russia, Georgia still gains benefits. Besides, it will be viewed as a contribution to the security and stability of the region.

It is clear that the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are the biggest problem in the region. The main subject as it was explained before is Nagorno Karabakh issue. Protracted confrontation between these two countries brought negative consequences to both of them; less for one and more for another. As a result Armenia was isolated from the regional projects; from the other hand Azerbaijan had to invest much more in order to be able to transport its oil products to European consumers. It is very difficult to propose any approach that can assure normalization and establishment of the political and economic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the latter first of all insists on resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh problem within its territorial integrity and makes this demand as precondition for further progress. Second, the speedy militarization of Azerbaijan and acquisition of an enormous amount of weapon systems shows that Azerbaijan is preparing for war rather than peace.

Turkey's current role in the region is to further support the Azerbaijani isolation policy towards Armenia. Hence it is less likely that Turkey will abandon this policy and open its border with Armenia, since this could threaten Ankara's relations with Baku. On the other hand establishment of diplomatic and economic relations can be beneficial for Turkey as well. At least it will bring Turkey closer to the European Union and may diminish tensions concerning the genocide issue. However, in order to build a mutual trust and get the ball rolling, Azerbaijan and Turkey have to call off the economic

blockade of Armenia and involve Armenia in regional projects. It is necessary to understand that while solving complex issues, mutual trust must be placed as a basis of any process.

Absence of mutual trust, conflicting interests, and competition between the USA and Russia in the region, make the situation more delicate. However, this does not mean that neither the USA nor the Russian Federation wants peace and stability in the South Caucasus. Both countries have declared the South Caucasus a sphere of their interests. The only way to get out of this situation is to achieve mutual consensus on key issues. Instead of dividing regional countries into two camps and seeing them on the opposite side of the barricade, it will be more effective to look at the region as a single, integrated security space. It is important to understand that the security of the region as a whole depends on the security of each of its states and national minorities.

The complexity of the current situation in South Caucasus is not a problem for only one or two countries. It has happened historically that all three states of South Caucasus have overlapping interests, demands and claims towards each other. All three countries have something that is disputed at least between two of them. The situation and current political-military developments in the region are so complex that it is difficult to be optimistic with respect to the future of the region. The future of the South Caucasus, at least for the next two decades, is foggy and very unpredictable. Therefore, the region will remain unsecure and unstable as long as issues discussed in this paper remain unresolved.

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⁵⁰Aris Ghazinyan, "From Iran to Karabakh: Can Azerbaijan take advantage of the possible war and start its own?" March 4, 2012, linked from *Armenia Now Home Page* at "Commentary," http://www.armenianow.com/commentary/analysis/37040/israeli_iran_nuclear_weapon_karabakh (accessed November 9, 2012).

⁵¹Tigran Sargsyan and Bidzina Ivanishvili, "Transcript of the joint press conference of RA Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan and Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili," January 17, 2013, linked from *The Government of the Republic of Armenia Home Page* at "Official News," <http://www.gov.am/en/news/item/6574/> (accessed January 21, 2013).